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The Lithuanian David

THE KREMLIN chose a rude way to start showing what it meant by its pledge not to use force against the Lithuanians, who have declared independence. Having given them three days to reverse their declaration, it conducted movements of troops and planes in a manner that the elected Lithuanian authorities, though uncowed, found distinctly threatening. Is that how Mikhail Gorbachev means to punctuate the "discussions"—he rejected "negotiations"—that he has now opened with Vilnius on a new relationship? Such an approach would mock his intent to put aside the Stalinist style by which the Soviet Union vacuumed up the Baltics in the first place. The White House was right to criticize these hints of "intimidation" in a statement yesterday.

A quick look at the Lithuanian-Soviet war of wills suggests it is a pitifully unequal struggle. Military moves aside, Moscow wields all the key economic and administrative levers, and Mr. Gorbachev presumably has a strong self-interest in maintaining Soviet territorial and political integrity. The Lithuanians can take symbolic steps to assert their independence, by setting up customs posts or sending in people to take over Moscow-run factories, for instance. But making Soviet

trucks stop at the border or enforcing management changes in factories is something else again.

Yet the Lithuanians, in negotiating with the Soviet Goliath, are not without resources. Local nationalism burns bright and kindles popular courage. Glasnost gives Lithuanians access to an attentive Soviet and international public. The old idea of disciplining and holding on to any republic that eyes independence obviously has a powerful hold on many Soviets at the center. But the new idea that is at the heart of the Gorbachev revolution is to move toward governing with the consent of the governed, the better to modernize Soviet society and the state. In the space between these ideas lies Lithuania's and the Kremlin's room for maneuver.

In Washington and elsewhere in the West, governments have applauded Lithuania while taking the position that since it does not meet the customary standard of controlling its own affairs, diplomatic recognition is not yet due. But the West should be concerned to warn the Kremlin that its diplomatic discretion does not indicate indifference to Soviet strong-arm tactics. That Lithuania's valiant struggle troubles a Soviet leader whom the West increasingly accepts as a global partner cannot be allowed to translate into an attitude that at the end of the day Moscow has a free hand.